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ABSTRACT

The federally funded Piedmont International Business Program of Lynchburg College has begun offering conversational Mandarin Chinese for people whose business activities bring them into contact with Chinese speakers. The course has three phases: an 8-week fall session with an enrollment of 11 students; two 8-week sessions offered in winter and spring with enrollments of three and four, respectively; and the class offered the next academic year with two 12-week sessions with an enrollment of three students from the previous year. Expectations of student achievement were adjusted downward as the program developed, with the classes largely paced by the students. This flexible approach to studying language is found to have merit for some people in the business world, although the unique problems of teaching this constituency are also found to require a unique approach on the teacher's part. (MSE)

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CONVERSATIONAL CHINESE FOR BUSINESS PEOPLE: A CASE HISTORY

by Thelma Swartzentruber Chow

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Conversational Chinese for Business People: A Case History

by Thelma S. Chow

This paper is a description of special course offerings in the Chinese language provided at Lynchburg College to the local business community. The courses were organized to meet the needs of people who are already active members of the business community and who are involved in trade relations with China or Taiwan or who anticipate developing such relationships. The classes were offered as part of the Piedmont International Business Program which was funded by a Title VI Grant from the U.S. Department of Education for a two year period beginning August, 1986.

Lynchburg College, a private, co-educational, liberal arts college located in the city of Lynchburg, Virginia, has an enrollment of 2,000 students. In an era of declining college enrollments, Lynchburg College has enjoyed a slight increase in enrollment. Forty percent of the students at Lynchburg College are non-traditional (adult) students and graduate students who are primarily from the Greater Lynchburg Community. In addition to the various baccalaureate degrees, Lynchburg College also offers graduate degrees through the School of Business and the School of Education.

The city of Lynchburg is located in the scenic Central Virginia area. The immediate metropolitan area around Lynchburg, which is the area served by the classes described here, has a population of only 150,000. The region including and surrounding this area is heavily dependent on manufacturing

for employment: 38% of the jobs were in manufacturing in the 1980's. A number of firms, both large and small, in the area are engaged in international trade; this includes trade with Taiwan and China. Products exported from the region include apparel, furniture, paper products, nuclear fuel, nuclear products and services, rubber products, footwear, special industrial machinery, fabric, floor coverings, pharmeceuticals, cosmetics, pipe fittings, electronic equipment, and radio communications equipment. Some companies indicate that exports account for as much as 40% of their total sales.

One of the stated goals of the Piedmont International Business Program which was funded by the Title VI grant was to offer opportunities to area business people for instruction, including language instruction. There are several colleges in the area (Lynchburg College among them) which offer courses for college credit in various Indo-European languages; one college also offers Japanese and Russian. None of the colleges were offering Chinese in 1986 when Lynchburg College began its program. To my knowledge, none of the language classes offered in the area were designed for non-college students. Surveys conducted in 1986 indicated that several local companies would like to see language classes offered for business people: specifically Spanish, French, Chinese and Japanese.

In August, 1986 Lynchburg College offered me a contract to teach Mandarin Chinese under the Title VI grant. The original idea of those who wrote the grant had been to combine a regular class of college students studying for college credit with interested business people. However, there was insufficient time for publicity before the opening of the fall semester. Furthermore, it was my opinion that in order to attract business people

we needed to offer something especially tailored to their needs and completely separate from the college credit course which should be designed primarily for full-time college students. The need for a separate course is important from the instructor's viewpoint as well as from the standpoint of the students. It is necessary to accommodate differences in scheduling needs, attendance and course requirements, vocabulary and course content, learning styles and pace of progress.

The traditional approach in the American college is to program material so that students must cover a set content in a specified number of weeks. The learning experience is packaged to fit the needs of institutional responsibility. Although this may be correct for some purposes it is not necessarily appropriate for all learning situations. Having learned Chinese myself with private tutors and without earning college credit and having been a tutor before being a college professor, it is easy for me to think in terms other than the traditional college oriented approach.

My concept for a class for business people at Lynchburg College was to offer something to those individuals who are already established in the business world, who are not able to engage in full-time or intensive language study, but who find their business activities bringing them into contact with people who speak Chinese. The students I visualized would not be working toward a goal of complete mastery and fluency, but being realistic about their current situations would primarily want to gain exposure to the language to increase their understanding of the country with which they are doing business (or hope to do business), thereby enhancing their business relationships and acumen. There is, of course,

a place for programs to meet the needs of people preparing to embark on a career in international business who want to achieve fluency and mastery in Chinese, but this is not the constituency which I was considering in this project.

The way the course came into existence would doubtless scandalize any self-respecting college registrar. Our academic dean was anxious to see a unique opportunity made available to the business community and was as flexible as possible. He essentially gave me a free hand in organizing the course -- length, fees, content, etc. From the beginning I was definite that the course would not be for credit; there would be no option of taking it for credit. It was to be entirely separate from the course in Chinese which we offer for credit.

Courses offered subsequently by the Piedmont International Business Program in French and Spanish have been offered as intensive courses which may be taken for college credit. They were designed to include several weeks of study abroad. Although these courses were advertised within the business community no one from that sector has enrolled. These courses were fundamentally different from the Chinese class in that they were essentially college credit courses, they were designed to be intensive and to attract full-time college students as well as business people.

We will consider the Chinese class in three phases. The first is the eight week session offered in Fall, 1986 with an enrollment of 11 students. The second phase is the two 8 week sessions offered winter and spring, 1987

with enrollments of four and three students respectively. The third phase is the class being offered 1987-88 in two 12 week sessions with an enrollment of three students who have continued from the previous year.

Phase One

In late September, 1986, after making some personal contacts in the business community to ascertain if there was sufficient and specific interest, we decided to offer an introductory class in conversational Chinese which would meet 3 hours each week for a period of 8 weeks. Special publicity was arranged through the local newspaper, the publication of the adult education program of Lynchburg College, and the Piedmont World Trade Council which is an organization of local business people. The response was very encouraging; our final enrollment was 11 students. After talking with several prospective students and soliciting their opinions, class meetings were scheduled as follows: 12:00-1:00 p.m. Mondays and Fridays, 7:30-8:30 p.m. Wednesdays. The class met from October 20 - December 17, 1986. The enrollment fee was $100. Such a low fee was possible only because of the support of the Title VI grant. The adult education program and our registrar wanted to offer Continuing Education Units. This was entirely immaterial to the students, however, and we have not continued the practice this year.

The eleven students who were enrolled (8 men and 3 women) represented six different companies engaged in international trade. Five of these companies were already trading with Taiwan; one of them has also made sales to China; another is now buying from China. The sixth company was negotiating for sales or a joint venture in China. The products exported or imported

by these companies are precision and balancing equipment, surgical sutures, cosmetics, footwear, electronic equipment, sterile solutions and feminine hygiene products.

The students can be identified as follows: 4 Chief Executive Officers, 2 Vice-Presidents, a Merchandise Manager, an Export Manager, a Sales Manager, the wife of one of the CEO's; the other student owns a local business which would not be a candidate for international trade, but she has traveled in China and took the class for personal satisfaction.

It is obviously not necessary to know Chinese in order to conduct trade with China or Taiwan. At least half of the students in the class do travel to Taiwan regularly and several have been to China for business purposes. No one in these companies is fluent in Chinese. These countries have been quick to train interpreters for English speaking business people. Hence, lack of facility in Chinese was not seen by the students as an absolute impediment to trade relations, but rather the understanding of Chinese is seen as an asset which can enhance trade relations.

As an instructor considering her students several conclusions were evident:

1. Most of the students carried heavy business responsibilities and were limited in terms of the amount of time they could devote to study.
2. With one possible exception, the students were over forty and thus well above the age considered appropriate for language learning.

3. There was a wide range of interests, learning capabilities, and business involvements represented.

My goals were necessarily simple: to help students gain some knowledge of the structure of the language (sound and grammar), acquire a small vocabulary, memorize some useful phrases, and gain some appreciation of cultural nuances through the language.

Several of the students are fluent in two or three Indo-European languages besides English; for two students English was not the first language. Thus, some of the students had had experience learning second and third languages. However, because Chinese is very different from the Indo-European languages in both grammatical and sound systems and because there are no cognates as is the case with Indo-European languages, it is not possible to acquire anything like a business vocabulary in a short course of this kind. The Chinese writing system creates additional complications for the beginning student.

There were frequent absences due to business related travel, although absence for other reasons was not a problem. Nevertheless, expectations of progress had to be adjusted.

Appendix A gives a brief week by week description of the first eight week session, revised to show what we actually covered.

The texts purchased by the students are both from Beijing Language Institute: Practical Chinese Reader I published in 1981 by the Commercial Press in China and New Chinese 300 distributed in the U.S. by Cheng & Tsui Company in Boston. Both texts have accompanying audio tapes which were made available to the students. Both texts use the pinyin system of romanization.

To my knowledge, there is no published text which is appropriate for a class of this kind. Consequently, a considerable amount of adaptation and creativity is required on the part of the teacher. The Practical Reader provides a manageable, basic introduction to the language; it is programmed for mastery of the written as well as the oral language. The vocabulary was chosen for young, full-time students. Chinese 300 provides situationally oriented vocabulary which is somewhat more useful to the adult student; nevertheless, it is also primarily intended to meet the vocabulary needs of the traditional student. It is not programmed as a first and complete introduction to the language.

My approach to learning vocabulary was to take a situation and work with vocabulary which would be required for that context, using the conversations in the texts as a starting point. It was frequently necessary to prepare supplementary materials: handouts and oral exercises to be used in class.

My teaching is context oriented rather than translation oriented. We learn what a Chinese person might say in a given situation rather than trying to translate what an American might say. Because the thought patterns of adult students are well established, there are stumbling blocks in this approach.

Class time was used primarily as follows: pronunciation drills, pattern sentence drills, role play conversations, explanations about the language and its use. At such an elementary level it is seldom necessary

to use class time for grammar discussions. Culture was not taught as a separate entity. Cultural nuances are often revealed through language choice and use; comments and explanations were offered naturally in the course of studying the language.

The class could be criticized as being superficial in terms of solid academic study. However, as one student who has continued studying this year expressed it, "For the majority of the people in the class who did not plan to go beyond the introductory level, there was no other way to teach it." The class was simply an attempt to demystify the language and culture. Evaluations at the end of the class indicated that the students felt the class was worthwhile and that they had benefited.

One CEO who travels to China summed it up neatly, "The class was psychological for me. It helped a lot. The language no longer seems mysterious and unknowable. I feel more comfortable now even though I don't understand."

Phase Two

In January, 1987 we offered a second 8 week session for four of the students who wanted to continue studying. At the request of the students, the Wednesday evening class was increased to two hours so that we had a total of four hours of class time each week. Three of the students then chose to continue for another 8 weeks in the spring.

We continued working with the same texts throughout the year, reviewing some of the material from the first session and then going on

to build additional vocabulary. We worked with situations such as shopping, asking for directions or addresses, eating in a restaurant, seeing a movie. Again, it was necessary to develop supplementary drills and exercises. I tried to adjust and develop materials appropriate to the needs and activities of the students. If I were to repeat a class at this level, I would definitely prepare even more material for drill and practice.

Two of the students were interested in learning characters, so we spent a limited amount of class time in the spring working with the written language. One of the students has continued working with the characters on his own and is now able to read several hundred characters.

With such a small class, individual attention and practice is possible. Problems are also more easily discovered. It is important to note that these students who have continued studying are not necessarily always learning the same things. Their areas of skill in learning language are different: one is good at the written language, another at pronunciation, another at incorporating grammar patterns. They remember different things in the vocabulary. They are under no pressure to learn the same things in the same order or at the same rate. Obviously, they are learning some of the same things or we could not function as a class. However, there is a wide range of capabilities which can be accommodated in a class which is conducted with this kind of flexibility. The students are not learning for tests. It should be emphasized that "flexibility" is not a euphemism for not learning.

Phase Three

In August and September, 1987 we advertised for a new introductory level class. However, there was little interest expressed and no one followed through to register for the class.

Since there were three students from the previous classes who wanted to continue studying, we offered a class for them. Two of these students had participated in all three of the 8 week sessions in 1986 - 87; the other one had attended only the first class. Due to his heavy travel schedule he was not able to attend class in the winter and spring, but had studied and worked with tapes on his own. He was able to rejoin the other two students with little difficulty.

This class is being conducted in two 12 week sessions with four hours of class time each week: Monday and Friday noons and 6:00 - 8:00 on Wednesday evenings. Tuition is $175 for each 12 week session.

The students can be identified as follows: the president and owner of a small company which supplies electronic components and trades with Taiwan, the Export Manager for a local company which manufactures feminine hygiene products and exports to Asia but not yet to China, the wife of the CEO of a German owned company which sells precision balancing equipment to China.

In the Fall we spent several weeks reviewing. We have continued to use Chinese 300 although less than half of our work is actually from the text. There is very little useable exercise material in the text to help students master the vocabulary and constructions which are introduced in the lesson conversations. I have prepared a considerable amount of material for oral use in class and for handouts. Some of the situations for which we have learned vocabulary are taking trips, changing money, feeling ill, getting a room in a hotel, visiting a post office, talking about the weather. We use the vocabulary from the text to build conversations about the students' experiences.

Class time is spent in a variety of ways: doing role play conversations, practicing real life conversations, learning sentence patterns, occasional pronunciation drill, doing grammar exercises and discussing grammar problems. This session for the first time we are also translating sentences from Chinese to English and vice versa. Since Chinese is a concept based language rather than a phonetic based language, it is helpful to the student who is building a vocabulary to understand the written language. As an aid to understanding the language, I have brought in character in a limited way this session (spring, 1988). As mentioned above, one student has tried to learn some character on his own. The other students are not actually memorizing the characters.

Problem areas in pronunciation continue to be a few vowels, the retrofiex sounds, but primarily the tones. As the students increase their vocabularies, problems related to the nauture of the Chinese sound system become more pronounced. The sound system is a closed one and tone

is a phoneme. From the kinds of difficulties evident in aural comprehension it is clear that the students have not psychologically incorporated tone as one of the phonemes in the system. Generally, they can hear and repeat the tonal patterns but when listening to real speech they confuse words which would be totally different if they were interpreting tone as a phoneme.

The use of Chinese verbs and verb construction is problematic for students who have lived all their lives -- more than 40 years in this case -- in a world where verbs must show tense. For Indo-European languages, tense is an imperative for main verbs in sentences or clauses. This is a non-issue in Chinese. Of course, there are many ways to express time relationships, tense, and other valid concepts in Chinese, but it is not through a system of scheduled conjugations. Differences in overlap of meaning for certain terms between languages and differences in word order present special problems for the student whose only languageof fluency is English.

It is occasionally necessary to comment on differences of language between Taiwan and China. Although the language is the same, there are a few lexical differences. The standard for pronunciation is the same but in reality many differences in accent exist. This is true between regions in China as well as between China and Taiwan. Some of these lexical and accent differences can be compared to differences between Castillian Spanish and South American Spanish.

The class this year has been conducted almost as a tutorial with the students deciding when they are ready to go to new material. They also make suggestions as to which kinds of exercises or activities they find most helpful, if they want to review, etc.

Again, the only problem with absences has been when students have been out of town. A kind of camaraderie and loyalty has developed within the group. We look forward to the class hour because we enjoy the company as well as because of the academic side of it. I have thoroughly enjoyed working with these students in spite of the difficulties due to lack of study time, the age of the students, no adequate published text, etc. One evening when one of the students was unexpectedly detained at the office and arrived late for class, I said, "It's hard to work eight to ten hours at the office and then have to come here and work for another two hours on Chinese." "Oh, no," he responded, "This is pure pleasure." These students are studying for direct reasons, not to meet requirements. They are also motivated by visits to Taiwan and China.

Conclusions

My original expectations for student progress were higher than was realistic. I have learned to adjust my expectations to what is possible for the participants in their situations. One of the hallmarks of these classes has been flexibility in every area. If we were locked into or concurrent with a credit course, it would not be possible to operate with the flexibility which has been necessary for this constituency. The classes have been paced by the students; this is not and cannot be the way it is in college level classes taken for credit.

Although the students have not progressed to a stage of easy fluency and progress is often slow, they have learned a great deal. And the teacher has had a wonderful time!

I am convinced that there are some people in the business world who can benefit from this approach to studying language. There will probably not be many individuals in any given location at the same time, however. Because of the unique problems involved in teaching this constituency, a teacher also needs to be able to take a unique approach. There may be other vehicles than colleges for offering this kind of learning experience, but in this instance doing it through the offices of Lynchburg College has worked well.

One of the fortunate things which has happened in the particular situation described in this paper is something which every good teacher hopes for: the lucky combination of people who want to learn what she has to teach being in the right place at the right time. Expressed in a Chinese concept, "It can happen, but it cannot be sought."

Appendix A

Course Description: Chinese for Business People 1986-87

Chinese for Business People is a special language course organized to meet the needs of people who are already active members of the business community and who are involved in trade relations with the Peoples' Republic of China and/or Taiwan or who anticipate developing such relationships. The course offers no credit and is rather flexible in the sense that it is up to the individual student as to how much of the material he/she actually masters. Audio-tape material is available to supplement the oral work in the classroom and is used at the initiative of the student.

In 1986-87 the course was offered in three sessions of 8 weeks each. The first session met for 3 hours per week: two noon hours and one evening. The second and third sessions met for four hours each week. This increase in meeting time was at the request of the students. We extended the evening session to two hours.

Following is a fairly detailed outline of material covered in the first session.

Week 1: Introduction to pin-yin system of romanization and the sound system of Mandarin. Introduction of simple vocabulary for greetings, pronouns, and titles. Practical Chinese Reader, Lessons 1 and 2.

Week 2: Introduction to the method of character writing. Continued drill with tones and other aspects of the sound system. Talking about names, introductions, family members. Interrogative forms. Practical Reader, Lessons 3 & 4 and Chinese 300, Lessons 1 & 2.

Week 3: Continued specific pronunciation drills. Names of countries, interrogative pronouns, question forms, simple sentences. Practical Reader, Lessons 5 - 7.

Week 4: Drill on difficult sounds and tones. Polite conversation, numbers, places. Practical Reader, Lessons 8 & 9 and Chinese 300, Lesson 3.

Week 5: Telling time, numbers over 10. Practical Reader, Lesson 9 & 10 and Chinese 300, Lesson 4.

Week 6: Working with time words, dates, telling time, working with numbers. Practical Reader, Lesson 11 and Chinese 300, Lesson 5.

Week 7: Telling time, telephone numbers, review of dates. Practical Reader, Lessons 11 & 12.

Week 8: Buying things, money terms, talking about languages. Use of measure words. Practical Reader, Lesson 12 and Chinese 300, Lesson 6.